

2 in. on Highway. H. 325,321.

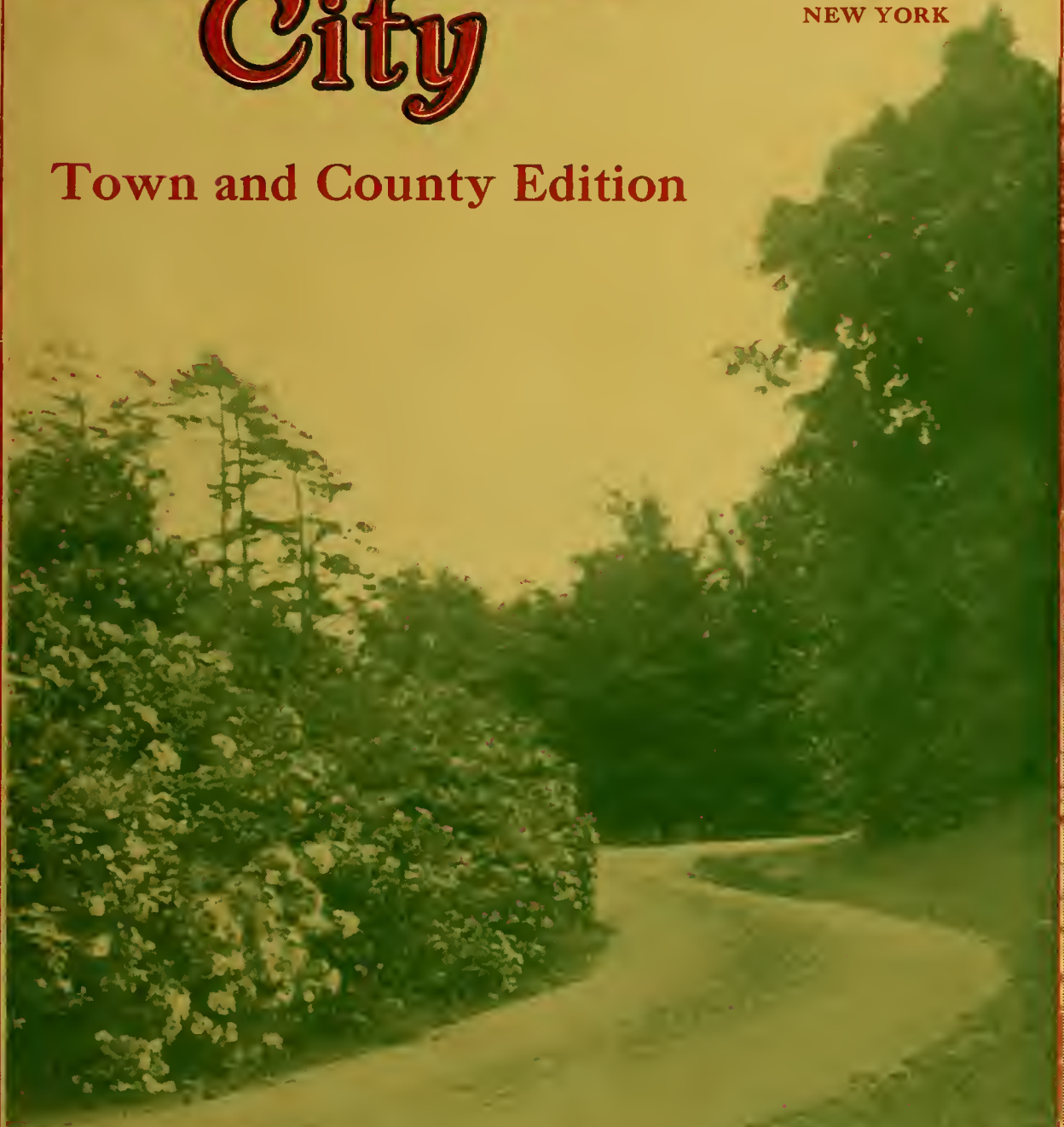
The American City

APRIL, 1916

35 Cents
\$3.00 a Year

Publication Office
87 Nassau Street
NEW YORK

Town and County Edition



ONE WAY OF TREATING STEEP BANKS LEFT BY THE ROAD-MAKERS
Shrubbery holds a bank better than grass, and is cheaper to maintain. Here we have
the Illinois, or prairie, rose covering the ground to the exclusion of weeds



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2016

<https://archive.org/details/firstroadsidepla00mill>

TOWN & COUNTY EDITION
of
The American City

87 Nassau Street
New York

APRIL, 1916

Volume XIV
Number 4

The First Roadside Planting Along the Lincoln Highway

By Wilhelm Miller

Head of Division of Landscape Extension, University of Illinois, Urbana, Ill.

DE KALB COUNTY, Illinois, is proud of having started the first "seedling mile" on the Lincoln Highway—the great transcontinental motor road from New York to San Francisco. It now aspires to have the first unit of roadside planting designed by a landscape gardener. The plans have been made and accepted, the nursery stock has been promised, and the planting will be done this spring under the supervision of an experienced gardener.

The famous "seedling mile" is even duller than most cultivated prairie, because it has no buildings of distinction, no farmhouse famed for its beauty, no school, no remarkable trees—not even a road intersection to give a little spice of danger! It resembles ten thousand other miles of Illinois roads in being lined on both sides by telephone poles, barbed wire fences and weeds.

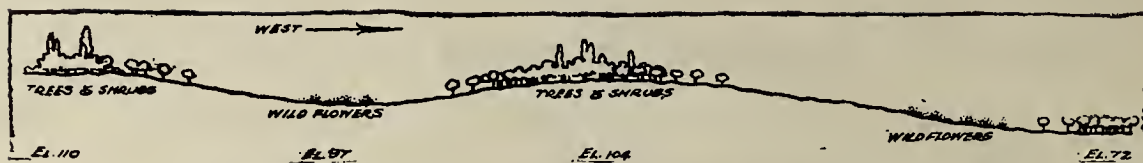
In spite of these cold, hard facts, we gazed hopefully at the prospect. "We" were a car-full of architects and landscape gardeners who were touring the Lincoln Highway across the state of Illinois in order to consider the decorative features as a whole. Our mission was to ask the local leaders not to make any bridge, arch, light, gate, fountain, marker, or other monument without submitting their plans to a state commission of artists for free advice and criticism. Our leader was Mr. Elmer C. Jensen, of Chicago, who had been appointed by the American Institute of Architects as chairman of its national Lincoln Highway committee. He had appointed thirteen state chairmen for the states through which the Lincoln Highway passes. One of these was

Mr. Frederick W. Perkins, in whose car we traveled. My own mission was to point out to everyone that roadside planting is a decorative feature that should go hand in hand with road construction, instead of following it a century or more later—if ever. And why not, if it adds only 5 per cent or so to the cost of road construction? When can that money be raised so easily as during the first enthusiasm that makes the good road possible?

Because it is so typical of its region, the De Kalb mile has a chance to compress the peculiar strength and beauty of the whole vast prairie country into one short poem—a pastoral or a moving picture of the best sort.

Among those who are helping to decorate this bit of country roadside six miles away from their home town are Mr. S. E. Bradt, secretary of the Illinois State Highway Commission; Mrs. R. A. Countryman and Miss Jessie M. Hunt, representing the women's clubs of Malta and De Kalb, and Mr. Frank K. Balthis, superintendent of grounds at the Normal School. Many local projects of this kind fail because there is no local person who knows how to do everything necessary. Luckily for De Kalb, the superintendent cannot only supervise the planting, but propagate new material, and see that the mile is taken care of for a number of years.

The plan for the De Kalb mile has been made by my assistant, Mr. Leon D. Tilton, after a visit to the spot. It is not an ideal or model mile to be copied by any other community, for no two miles should be quite alike. It simply aims to meet the prac-



SKETCH SHOWING PROFILE AND DISPOSITION OF PLANTING ALONG LINCOLN HIGHWAY MILE.

To the passerby the road seems hopelessly flat and commonplace. The difference between the highest spot and the lowest is only 38 feet, but that is enough to give a feeling of rolling prairie, if the hiltops are accentuated by tall trees and the valleys kept free from trees. From the high points the motorist will look down upon a dazzling sheet of yellow flowers, reminiscent of the wild prairie.

tical conditions of this particular locality in an appropriate and inexpensive manner. There is one strong feature of this plan that I ought to point out: it really fits the country instead of imitating a city park. The idea that most people have of roadside planting is a row of elms or some other species planted at uniform distances. That ideal fits the city, but it would ruin the country to have no other planting scheme. Another notion that is very common on the prairies, where land is worth \$200 an acre, is that trees rob crops too much. Some of the farmers are willing to plant the roadsides solidly with shrubs. That, again, is a city ideal, based upon the need of parks, where the roaring, ugly town can be shut out so that people can walk about at leisure and enjoy beautiful details. The country is a big, open place that is beautiful in itself, and people flash through it in automobiles, seeing only the big things. Line an Illinois road with trees and you shut out the country; you miss the very thing that people come to see—the wonderful breadth of the prairie. One or two clumps of trees to the mile may give variety enough to delight the traveling public.

Let us have wonderful masses of color, too, from wild flowers. And let most of the roadside be laid down in grass, so that it can be cheaply mowed. Dozens of other plans will be necessary for other conditions, but here is a standard for the prairie. It does not antagonize farmers, roadside engineers, or commissioners. It fits the coun-

try, and it costs much less than the city style of planting.

Some may shake their heads over the Lombardy poplars in this plan, and some bold spirit may write me that I am "a traitor to the prairie." For these vegetable exclamation points make the strongest possible contrast with flat, treeless land. A mile of them would be vulgar. But cheer up, there are not many in the plan, and they will soon be dead, and then the native trees will permanently harmonize with an American landscape. Meanwhile, they will give beauty and interest to the road quicker than anything else.

For the remainder of this article the reader is indebted to Mr. Tilton, who describes his plan in detail.



HOW THE GATEWAY WILL BE IMPROVED

To the commonplace trees now standing in the farmyards at the beginning of the mile will be added others in the roadway, so selected and so grouped as to form a natural gateway to the section

The only present attraction of the seedling mile is its new concrete driveway. For the purpose of design it is perfectly straight. There is, actually, a reverse curve of about 16 minutes, but this is scarcely noticeable. Two slight elevations are found, the highest, at the east end, being 38 feet above the lowest point of the mile, the extreme west end. (See profile.) In the dip between the two high points there is a small concrete culvert, the only architectural feature in the length. There is no variation from ragged wire fences, except for several hundred feet of old hedge.

On account of the straightness of the strip, and of the absence of striking vistas or picturesque objects, no opportunity is given for the enframing of a view. There

is a clump of interesting trees to the north that might be framed and made a feature if the road were curved, but when such objects are framed from a point in a straight road a change of the observer's position throws out the picture. Not only is there a scarcity of elements useful in design, but there are several ugly features along the way, and a hog lot or two, with the customary ragged buildings bordering the road.

On the other hand, there are no deep cuts or costly fills, and no troublesome ditches. And there is a charming view across the prairie to the west. From the crest of each elevation there is a broad view of a great

missioner, the question of maintenance, the relation to local flora, and the vexing factor of speed. The essential question seems to be that of maintenance. The tendency to allow the roads to take care of themselves is all too common. What, then, are the opportunities for anything better than tall weeds and grass?

In order to keep the cost of maintenance low there should be more grass than trees. Every community can take its roads out of the ugly class by making them clean and orderly. Therefore our most urgent recommendation was that the main area of the roadside be plowed, harrowed and sown



REPEATERS OF THE PRAIRIE

Sunflowers, both perennial and annual, are a great specialty of the Middle West. The composite flowers may be considered miniature editions of the prairie, because of their flat-topped clusters

corn land. In September the tree-muffled homes of the farmers appear in the distance like flecks of green upon the sea of yellow grain—diverting features in what might otherwise be dreary monotony.

The questions of drainage, drifting snow, obstructed views, fertility, nearby soil, and the tendency toward dampness and dust alongside the road all had to be squarely met. In addition, the problem was complicated by the necessity of considering the desires of those who live along the highway, the requirements of the highway com-

with a mixture of grass and clover seed. After the grass has become established, the weeds should not be troublesome.

The higher points along the road are to be planted with trees, largely in groups at the top, leading off into short rows toward the hollows. With such an arrangement, persons approaching the summit may see, through the green frame ahead, the long stretch of grass-bordered road lying beyond. Such a view in itself, if the roadside is well kept, will be notable. From afar, these same groups of trees will serve to



THE ILLINOIS PLANTING MOTIVE

It has been proposed that each state have a different combination of native trees and shrubs that will stand for the dignity and beauty of the state. The planting motive is to be fully elaborated at important places like civic centers, school grounds, entrances to cities and dramatic views. Hawthorns like these are proposed for Illinois, together with Western crabapple and compass plant



THE LINCOLN PLANTING MOTIVE

The bur oak has been called "the tree that looks like Lincoln," because of its rugged character. The Illinois, or prairie, rose symbolizes the tender side of Lincoln's nature. Both will thrive most of the way from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and may become permanent road-markers for the Lincoln Highway

accentuate the difference in elevation between high land and low. The Lombardy poplar is the only tree to be used that is not native to the state, and this has been suggested, for want of better native material, because of its value as an accent. The oaks will be the dominant trees, the bur, red and pin being must extensively used. In addition, numbers of native haws and crabs, redbud and gray dogwood have been specified to give variety to the scale of the planting and to relate the new groups more closely to the existing tree groups.

The policy toward wild flowers grows out of the fact that the greater portion of the travel along the highway is likely to be in automobiles, and at much greater speed than formerly. The day of the slow-moving carriage is past, and with it has passed also the interest of the traveler in the immediate roadside aspect. The attention of the motorist is now largely concentrated upon the road ahead, to be diverted to the side only by something unusual and startling. The beauty and charm of individual flowers is lost in speed; the interest is largely in masses. Therefore it would be unwise to line a whole mile with wild flowers, even if the cost could be afforded. It is simpler and better to have two strong masses of color in the "valleys" which will appear with dramatic force from the hill-tops.

In the design of a roadway the fences have a very prominent part. Along this particular section those who have old fences about their properties are being urged to replace these with new ones or to repair the old. The planting of vines was considered as being suitable for use as a foil to these long lines of fences, but the

recommendation was not urged because of the tendency of rampant vines to hasten the breaking down of fences. Hedges, too, like rampant vines, offer protection to insect pests and sap the fertility of the soil, so the farmers are tearing them out. The projectors of the highway intend to see that the fences are kept trim, so that they will at least be in keeping with the general spirit of order, even though they do not actually contribute to the artistic whole.

The cost of the De Kalb project cannot be estimated closely, nor can a standard cost per mile be given, because the conditions vary greatly in every such undertaking. It is well to allow \$500 a mile in the open country, or from 5 to 10 per cent of the cost of road construction where all the work must be paid for. At De Kalb the cost will be cut low, because the people get their plan for nothing; the labor is to be given by the farmers along the route; the plan materials are to be supplied by public-spirited nurseries, while superintendence and maintenance are donated by a skilled gardener. Expense has been saved to the state because the planting plan and planting list need not be elaborated as much as usual. For the same reason the plan and list are not given here.

With the courage of pioneers, the people of De Kalb are setting out to do the thing that marks artistic progress everywhere. They are making the work of construction also the work of art. In the end, this "seedling mile" of the Lincoln Highway may become the inspiration, if not the prototype, of many other miles of roadway now dull and monotonous, but worthy of better care and more orderly treatment.

EDITOR'S NOTE.—See also cover page of this issue.

